

THE PRAYER OF ST BENEDICT: A DYNAMIC
META-PARADIGM FOR A THEOLOGY OF FAITH

by

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O Gracious and Holy Father,
Give Us Wisdom to Perceive You,
Intelligence to Understand You,
Diligence to Seek You,
Patience to Wait For You,
Eyes to Behold You,
A Heart to Meditate Upon You,
And A Life to Proclaim You;
Through The Power of the Spirit
Of Jesus Christ Our Lord, Amen.¹

THE *Prayer of St Benedict (PSB)* resonates with the innermost longing of the human spirit and expresses the universal yearning for a deeper experience and knowledge of God. Its direct and simple appeals articulate our human desire for a ‘glimpse’ of a transcendent reality that is so often only dimly perceived and vaguely felt. The suppliant asks God to reveal himself in a deeper and more profound way than thus far experienced. That the author does indeed have a relationship with God is evident; however, the appeal is for a more intimate experience of God that satisfies the deepest longings across the spectrum of our cognitive faculties. The *Prayer* is universal in every sense, transcending the boundaries of Christian confession and reflecting the desire for an experience of God inherent within most spiritual traditions. It is the cry of the agnostic, the everyday believer, the theologian and the mystic – the appeal of any sincere seeker who finds in its direct simplicity resonances with our human quest for ultimate truth and meaning.

The *Prayer* is found in Alcuin of York's (c.735–804) *Officia per Ferias*, and in two ninth-century texts, the *Fleury Prayer Book*, where it is titled the *Prayer of St Ambrose*, and the *Book of Cerne*.² These sources suggest that the author is someone other than St Benedict of Nursia (c.480–550). However, *The Rule of St Benedict*, noteworthy for its discerning wisdom and pragmatic guidance for those who seek God in a vowed monastic context, makes it easy to see why the *Prayer* is attributed to St Benedict. Those who seek admittance into the monastery are asked the reason why they wish to live such a life. Their reply is, 'To seek God' [ch.58].

This reflection on the *PSB* will not dwell on what the author specifically meant by each term and coupling of terms, but will rather use the internal logic of the *Prayer* to suggest a dynamic interpretation for bringing into focus central elements of a theology of faith. Most theological approaches that deal with faith do so within a context where faith is treated as a component subject within an introduction to theology, in apologetic attempts to prove faith as justified true belief, or where faith is considered as an element in a presentation of Christian doctrine. The *Prayer* provides an epistemological structure for an interpretation and understanding of key concepts in a theology of Christian faith. The intention is to present elements in the *Prayer* as the foundation upon which a theology of faith may be constructed.

The *Prayer* is both precise in that it reflects the basic principles of epistemology, and open-ended, as it leaves to God the manner and the *loci* of his self-manifestation. The inner logic, each word and phrase of the *Prayer* is saturated with spiritual and theological meaning. The *PSB* considered as a whole operates as a dynamic meta-paradigm of faith by bringing into focus central elements regarded as integral to a comprehensive analysis of the nature of faith by grounding the act of faith in wisdom. This dimension overarches all the others, as it is the first grace requested in the *Prayer*, and presumably, therefore, is the condition for the fulfilment of the other graces necessary for a deepening of faith. This central theme, where wisdom is understood as a theological-epistemological category, will guide this discussion.

The first part will examine the wisdom element of the *Prayer* and argue that upon this element a meta-paradigm of faith may be constructed through discerning that the *experiential*, *critical*, and

transcendental approaches provide subsidiary paradigms that enable a coherent analysis of the nature of Christian faith. These paradigms are distilled from an analysis of the *structure*, *content*, and *intention* of the *PSB* respectively. The second part will explore the relationship between these paradigms through four descriptive models. Finally, a brief analysis of 'a day in the life' of Jesus from the Gospel of Mark will illustrate the relationship between the paradigms of faith as described in the fourth model.

'Wisdom to Perceive You' – Retrieving Wisdom as a Structuring Principle for Contemporary Theology

'Wisdom to perceive you', as the first grace requested, is the cornerstone upon which the subsequent graces are constructed. It serves as the key to open the full *sensus* of the *Prayer*. 'Wisdom to perceive you', interpreted with a prior acceptance of the mystery of faith and the ultimate ineffability of God, implies that to perceive God is not to know God through possession of God, but to be graced by an insight rooted in the experience of being possessed by God. Wisdom is not attained but granted by grace given to human consciousness through contemplation of the mysteries of faith. It is only by entering contemplatively into the mystery of faith that the mysteries of faith are properly perceived. This wisdom penetrates, in a unified and simple act of insight, that which is understood as ultimate reality, as God. This reality is now no longer an external phenomenon, an objective principle, or set of propositions, but rather acts as the very ground beneath the unfathomable depths within the perceiving subject. The contemplative subject through wisdom begins to identify with the object so utterly that, becoming immersed within the mystery of faith, he no longer perceives an external object, but the inner reality, the very identity—albeit only to the degree of which the structure of human consciousness is capable—of the perceived object, God. Thomas Merton emphasizes the need to turn toward God in the obscurity of a darkness that is not comprehended by the light of conscious reason. The apophatic path that ultimately illuminates God through co-identification is the wisdom that perceives beyond mere intellectual reasoning and in the silence of wordless relationship.

He who is infinite light is so tremendous in His evidence that our minds only see Him as darkness. *Lux in tenebris lucet et tenebrae eam non comprehendunt* ("The light lives in the darkness, and the darkness does not Comprehend it"). If nothing that can be seen can either be God or represent Him to us as He is, then to find God we must pass beyond everything that can be seen and enter into darkness. Since nothing that can be heard is God, to find Him we must enter into silence... God cannot be understood except by Himself. If we are to understand Him we can only do so by being in some way transformed into Him, so that we may know him as He knows Himself. Faith is the first step in this transformation, because it is a cognition that knows without images and representations, by a loving identification with the living God in obscurity.³

Wisdom is the final cause of authentic faith that grasps with an inner certainty, intuitively and independently of the active performance of reason, the object of faith by virtue of an elevated interior perception. Wisdom is the essential grace needed to do theology systematically, through seeking a coherence that resists the reduction of belief to its manifest elements and so obscuring the mystery at the heart of faith. Mere knowledge is often only a superficial awareness of the many facets of the whole, and lacks the comprehending capability of understanding. Understanding, while able to comprehend and reason logically to conclusions, grants only a limited vision of reality by seeing only refracted elements and separate components as constitutive dimensions of a larger reality. Wisdom is the gift of penetrative insight into the fundamental interconnectedness of all of reality. It sees connections and makes connections, unifying the seeming disparateness of reality. Wisdom gives an integral and holistic *sensus* of ultimate reality as the foundation of all reality and grants an experience and understanding that includes and transcends the rational modes of knowing.

The insight given by wisdom is an act of the intelligence that comprehends through perceiving the necessary relationships between the various propositions and mysteries of faith – the *nexus mysteriorum*, the inner connectedness of the mysteries of faith, which together provide a *sensus plenior* of the larger mystery of faith. Consequently, understanding comes not through the amassing of a number of propositions, but rather through intuiting the relationships that exist between them and the underlying principles

of unity, which make them parts of the whole, itself grasped through wisdom. Wisdom is an insight that goes further than mere comprehension but sees, in a single act of the intellect, the whole.

The increasing historical consciousness and the differing perspectives of a pluralistic world-view, while providing creative and stimulating resources for the deepening of human thought, nonetheless inhibit clarity of insight into what is essential in the diverse viewpoints in our postmodern intellectual milieu. Theology is itself subject to this bewildering range of new insights, conflicting perspectives and fluctuating points of reference. This fragmentation is experienced across the spectrum of theological thought, providing a necessary pluralism for creative thinking, but also creating fractures that deny theologians the broad consensus of meaning so vital for the systematic development of theology. This is a concern shared by theologians in both the Catholic and the Reformed Traditions:

Theology is in a time of transition and ferment, partly because of the collapse of the categories and paradigms of the modern world spawned by the Enlightenment... We are living in the midst of a widespread fragmentation and perhaps even disintegration that appears to be affecting all dimensions of Western culture, including the theological enterprise. Consequently, fragmentation has become perhaps the most obvious characteristic of the theological landscape today.⁴

The debilitating effects of this fragmentation have provoked many theologians to seek a creative engagement with the philosophical and cultural factors that give rise to this phenomenon in contemporary theology. Their efforts are marked by a conscious shift away from doing theology in a manner that seeks a return to the security of a bygone theological age and resurrecting the security offered by the categories and systems of a 'pre-postmodern' era. They realistically acknowledge the concerns of the contemporary scene, and construct theologies that engage with postmodern thought, while not being captive to the disintegrative and deconstructionist uncertainty of the more extreme elements of postmodernism.

In order to overcome the challenges to theology presented by the above concerns, we turn to wisdom as a theological structuring principle for our reflection on the *Prayer*. Two observations

pertinent to wisdom as our structuring principle for this discussion require particular attention. The first is the re-emergence of wisdom as the integrating and synthesising function in mainstream systematic theology. The vagueness and the mystical connotations associated with wisdom and all it implied gave it secondary consideration in a theology dominated by the demands of enlightenment rationality, or banished it entirely to the domain of spiritual theology. A second point is a demonstration of the power and flexibility of paradigms to preserve simultaneously what is of perennial value, while allowing the shift in theological consciousness to take place without radical fracturing. By appealing to a paradigm approach for our analysis of central elements in the faith discourse, we are able to confront the challenges of fragmentation in theological method, while also engaging with the concerns presented by postmodernism.

The basis of our analysis is the complementary and comparative paradigms within a meta-paradigm of faith, discerned in the *PSB*. These three perspectives are paradigms that enable the *PSB* to be understood as a dynamic meta-paradigm of faith. This presumes that 'perception' of God is attainable through the grace of a wisdom that enables an intuitive grasp of the whole, the meta-paradigm as being more than the sum of its parts, the paradigms. As has been indicated, the intention is to distil the elements of the *Prayer* into three paradigms that correspond to the central elements in the theological meta-paradigm of faith revealed by an interpretive understanding of the *PSB*. This analysis of the structure, content and intention of the *PSB* will demonstrate how it functions as a paradigm of the faith discussion with the three elements of the experiential, the critical and the transcendental constituting three contrasting and complementary paradigms within the broader meta-paradigmatic framework of the *Prayer*. This presumes that the theological category of wisdom operates as a structuring principle in our theological discourse.

The three paradigms within the dynamic meta-paradigm of faith of the *PSB* are *experiential*, *critical*, and *transcendental*. We situate the faith discussion within the perspectives of these paradigms. The *PSB* provides the framework for delineating and identifying these three paradigms as explicatory of faith. The *PSB* considered from the perspective of its *structure* (experiential), *content* (critical), and

intention (transcendental), embraces all three paradigms. These paradigms are related in terms of (1) each individual paradigm, (2) as a progression from one phase to the next, (3) continually refining itself through an ongoing dialectic, or as (4) a synchronic moment that grasps intuitively the three paradigms as a unity in which there is an interpenetration of all three moments. The nature of these relationships suggests the *PSB* as a dynamic meta-paradigm for a theology of faith. This will be developed in the second part of this discussion.

The Nature and Function of Paradigms in Theology

The value of interpreting the *Prayer* according to particular theological paradigms lies in this method's capacity to establish certain identifiable parameters within which the faith discussion may constructively progress. Another achievement of the paradigm method is its latitudinal nature, which is resilient enough to absorb and incorporate into the broader faith discussion most of the traditional elements, conflicting methodologies and diverse theological positions.

The application of a paradigm as a framework of analysis and reconstruction enables the systematic ordering of traditional, innovative, and paradoxical theories to be absorbed and evaluated within a broadly identifiable structure. New and controversial insights need not necessarily threaten established principles and theories. Enduring truths that form foundations for the development of creative theories and insights may be preserved and appreciated even as they are reassessed and re-evaluated within a broad conceptual structure. In this structure they are not immune to a valid questioning and criticism that seeks a development of understanding and a deepening of insight.

A meta-paradigm holds existing paradigms in tension and provides coherence to the clustering of paradigms that share a common theme, thus facilitating synthesis in contemporary theological thought. The fragmentation of theological approaches and methods as indicated above is symptomatic of a deeper scepticism of an underlying principle of unity in contemporary human thought. The refined conceptual frameworks in contemporary theology, by their very ability to gather and articulate varying strands of thought into overarching principles of method, while

preserving inherent truths, is one of the accomplishments of a meta-paradigmatic approach.⁵

While conscious of the potential for these frameworks to become totalizing narratives that presume to embrace in a comprehensive explanatory system multiple constitutive elements, the very consciousness of this temptation overcomes this possibility and provides a structure that may reconcile much that would remain in opposition. Different approaches to an understanding of Christian faith need not be statically irreconcilable because we lack an appropriate methodology to negotiate our way between apparently conflicting faith ideologies. Differing approaches to the faith discussion have and still possess the capacity to paralyse any meaningful progress, as potentially conflicting perspectives degenerate into theological polarities that are confrontational toward other positions. To negotiate our way among this diversity, we must use the methodological tools of paradigms and meta-paradigms, rather than declare conflict and polarization as irresolvable. The necessary plurality within theological discourse enriches the unique premisses and points of emphasis within each system or paradigm to broaden theological thought. Adopting a meta-paradigm to facilitate this process, far from creating an all-encompassing 'master-narrative', in fact serves to emphasize the particularity of each of the paradigms and so to deepen the distinctive characteristics and unique value of each within the discussion.

This meta-paradigm, with its three contrasting and complementary paradigms of understanding faith, is not exhaustive. It is open to reconstruction, renewal and development, as are the constitutive paradigms within the overarching meta-paradigm. The three paradigms or patterns of thought about faith discerned in the *PSB* and through which it can be interpreted have emerged throughout the history of theological attempts to grapple with the nature of faith. Each has an underlying conceptual assumption that determines its particular interpretation of religion, Christianity, and, more specifically, Christian faith. The three paradigms are both historical developments within the Catholic theological tradition and are complementary methodologies that continue to stimulate and enrich the diversity and plurality of contemporary theology.

THE PARADIGMS OF FAITH

We now focus more specifically on each of the paradigms, highlighting the key notions and theological categories that designate each as experiential, critical, and transcendental. This will be a cursory analysis, as the discussion on the models of interrelationship between the paradigms will demand a more in-depth focus in order to bring to the fore the nature of these relationships.

The Formal Structural Element as Experiential

The formal structural element of the *Prayer* reveals experience as the predominant mode through which one comes to consciousness of God. The desire for an experience of God in the mode indicated by the verb is the structural feature that manifests itself as the principal condition through which God is known. The tight and methodical structure of the request for an increased capacity of a faculty (noun) of the human, followed by the manner in which it is granted through the mode of an active operation (verb), is the distinctive feature that marks experience as the underlying grace requested. The parallelism of this structure repeated throughout the prayer stresses that experience is the primary mode through which God is revealed to the human person, and through which the person comes to a relational knowledge of God. The grace requested for an intensification of a particular faculty, innate, yet not completely actualized, is not in and for itself, but for a specific end – the increase of faith through the honing of the particular human faculties of wisdom, intelligence and so on, that one may more perfectly experience God.

The theoretical framework upon which the view of the necessity of an initial experience of the transcendent is predicated is the pre-reflective understanding of metaphysical encounter. It is the interpretation of human experience with reference to the transcendental dimension of the human person. It presumes the presence of God and grace in every human experience, whether recognized, acknowledged, and responded to as such, or not. This unthematized conception of graced human experience is fundamental in the theology of Karl Rahner, where the transcendent God is radically immanent in every human experience.⁶ The

continual interpretation of the significance of experience within an understanding of Rahner's theology of grace leads to a greater thematizing of what is preconceptually present, but not entirely manifest. This process does not take place mechanically, as suggested by this brief explanation, but may occur synchronically. Experiential encounter with the divine 'other' and the interpretive meaning given to it are, together with the synchronic understanding of experience, the dynamic process within which the faith journey takes its course. From foundational unarticulated experiences to more conscious and conceptualized experiences, there is the acknowledgement of the fundamentally graced nature of all human experience.

The Critical Nature of the Content

The contents of the *Prayer*, the concepts embodied in it, and the actual words of supplication express the desire for an experience of God that can be confirmed by a critical and rational interpretation. The critical nature of the content indicates that an authentic relationship with God proceeds from a prior experience of God that is subsequently conceptualized and articulated by rational reflection. The identification of this perspective of the *PSB* as being a critical paradigm of faith is to underscore the necessity for a rigorous investigative understanding of the nature of faith. Wisdom is the supreme faculty and gift of the cognitive act; without it, theology would be reduced to a mere collection of statements, propositions, and speculative ideas about God. This, while retaining the vestiges of theology, would in fact be simply 'God talk' or natural theology. The integrating function of wisdom is the indispensable basis of a properly critical approach to an analysis of the nature of faith.

The designation 'critical', used here to describe a paradigm within the *PSB* by virtue of its content, is a broad use of that term. It is indeed critical because it seeks some satisfaction about the fact of God and the nature of God by a rational epistemic process grounded in the faculties of the intellect. It recognizes the value of the critical process in the spiritual-theological quest as a balancing and corrective influence on the subjective experience. The *PSB*, by placing 'intelligence to understand you' as the second grace requested, and prior to the imaginative, affective and

spiritual, acknowledges that the cognitive process of coming to knowledge of and about God is primarily guided by the intellect and its practical function, understanding. The critical function of the intellect enjoys primacy in developing an understanding of God, but is barren without the parallel employment of the other vital functions of human cognition that are needed as a balancing influence on an unrestrained rationalism.

In attempting to define the nature of theology, the phrase 'a critical reflection on faith' forms the basis of most definitions. Theology, as the science of faith, exercises the critical function employed by all scientific endeavour, without, however, reducing itself to a mere science among the empirical sciences. As all science operates within paradigms that accept the foundational presuppositions within their particular field which guide theories, so too does theology, with its foundations rooted in the transcendental and cultural-historical experiences of transcendent reality. The *PSB*, operating within the horizon of faith, affirming the object of faith in its opening address and recognizing the possibility of faith in its closing line, is thus properly critical. It situates itself in a position where it is neither pre-critical nor sceptically critical, by virtue of its appeal for the gracing of all the human faculties responsible for attaining knowledge.

Nevertheless, recognized as indispensable to a comprehensive theology of faith are the affective ('a heart to meditate on you'), the imaginative ('eyes to behold you') and the performative ('a life to proclaim you') dimensions of faith. A true epistemic act includes as a vital element the rational-critical in conjunction with the other cognitive faculties such as the affective, the spiritual, the imaginative, and the performative as necessary in completing the cognitive process.

The Transcendental Intention

What is the purpose of the *PSB*? Why did the author conceptualize and articulate the deepest aspirations of his heart in this prayer? What is the desired and hoped-for outcome of a deepened faith in God through the praying of the *PSB*. The final supplication—'and a life to proclaim you'—is the logical outcome of the previous graces requested, and is the expected consequence of a deeper experience and understanding of God. A more intense

consciousness of God is desired, not only for the intrinsic good of such consciousness, but ultimately that it will lead to a life of loving action. The suppliant's intention is not mere perception and understanding for its own sake, but in order to be able to live in a way that proclaims the reality, truth, and love of God.

Furthermore, it is necessary to bring into focus the epistemic relevance of the transcendental nature of the *PSB* in so far as it completes the process of understanding. In what sense then is it possible to describe the *PSB* as a transcendental paradigm of faith? In what precisely does an interpretative understanding of the *PSB*, particularly with attention to its purpose, constitute itself as being an approach to faith that may be identified as transcendental?

Firstly, its transcendental nature lies in its intention, i.e. the purpose of the *Prayer* is for the grace actively to live the imperatives of faith as experienced and reflected upon, by transcending the limitations of self, of unthematized experience, and of an uncritical appropriation of the faith experience and its existential demands. This is the primary reason for this identification. Secondly, the transcendental method understood as a progressive and continuous search for deepened knowledge of God and experience of God. Thirdly, the tight relationship between existential experience and critical reflection presumed by the *Prayer* resonates with the transcendental method of Karl Rahner, which seeks the primary and intrinsic conditions for faith in the human person and in the presence of God in all experience.⁷ Closely allied to this is the 'transcendental argument' as providing an epistemic grounding of faith through its regressive movement towards the very conditions within the person, history, and experience as making faith possible, reasonable, and consonant with human nature.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PARADIGMS

With reference to Ian Barbour's typology for describing different modes of relationship between science and religion,⁸ the paradigms of faith will be similarly related. Barbour's four ways of relating science and religion are conflict, independence, dialogue, and integration. I will relate the paradigms of faith along these lines as models of *independence*, *dialogue*, *integration*, and *synthesis*.

As the interpretation of the *Prayer* is itself subject to a multi-level interpretation, so does the dynamic of the interrelationship

between the three paradigms reveal itself through wisdom, as open to meanings that reflect the theological presuppositions of the interpreting subject. A predisposition to regard faith as primarily interpreted and expressed by a defining paradigm is entirely consonant with an understanding of this paradigmatic approach as revealing distinctive features of faith. This is reflected in the *first model* of relationship. Adopting the conversion theme as an hermeneutical key for interpreting the interconnectedness of the paradigms, one finds an adequate model for discussing the dynamics of conversion. This conversion process, understood as stages along the path to a genuine faith commitment, is expressed in the *second model* of relationship. Straddling the phases of an initial conversion and a deepening of the primary conversion 'event' is the third model. While conversion is a process marked by defining stages, it is never entirely subject to the neat categories and theories that tend to predominate in the popular imagination. For the initiate and the neophyte, the *third model* of relationship is explanatory and instructive. For the person of committed faith, the third model is both descriptive and prescriptive in interpreting ongoing conversion, which ensures that faith is nourished and strengthened by the movement defined as dialectical in this model. The *fourth model* describing the nature of the relationship between the three paradigms is characterized by the wisdom element granting an integrated vision of faith. In this model, faith is no longer understood as movement along stages, but an intense inner reality where all three paradigms are of equal importance in describing and expressing the nature of faith. The faith experience of the person may be described as mystical and practical, contemplative and active. This mystical, contemplative faith is essentially also practical, as it is the true contemplative who in action finds both the source and expression of genuine faith.

The consideration of the paradigms will show how they are in fact related and how this relationship may possibly develop with reference to the *PSB* as a guiding instrument. The value of this method is that it clarifies the nature of each paradigm by way of comparison, contrast and complementarity. As each model of relationship between the paradigms is a development on the preceding one, it will not be necessary to repeat what has been

said before, as each model actualizes the elements in the preceding model.

(1) *Distinct Paradigms – Independence*

Each paradigm is a distinct self-contained unit that is sufficient in itself to provide a justification of faith within a particular context, from a specific perspective or because the individual or community implicitly accepts this as the fundamental criterion for validating faith. It would be unwise to assert the strict independence of each paradigm as sufficient within itself to assure faith understood in its complete articulated and expressed form. The historical trend and contemporary fact, as evidenced in the diverse faith confessions within Christianity, indicate the reliability of identifying each paradigm as to some extent valid and sufficient in guaranteeing faith as generally understood.

Nevertheless, regarded as distinct and self-contained units, each paradigm is deficient in providing a comprehensive analysis of both the act (the subjective response of the person) and the content (the object of faith – God) of faith. A comprehensive account of faith demands that the whole of the faith reality is demonstrated as actualized in every paradigm. The elements that definitively characterize a particular paradigm may not be explicit in the others, but are implicit in the fuller meaning of each paradigm. A person who operates out of a particular paradigm would admit the inadequacy of an approach that gives primacy to one or two aspects of faith that may exclude the complementary value of the other paradigms. Rather, one would assert that the foundational vision, which leads to a theology of faith representative of a particular approach, is in itself valid and reflects the concerns out of which a particular paradigm emerges.

For example, no serious theologian who operates predominantly out of the experiential paradigm would maintain the irrelevance of a critical articulation of faith emerging out of experience as necessary for giving meaning to his or her fundamental position. Likewise, those who emphasize the necessity of providing a critical and rational underpinning of the propositions of faith would also accept that the subject matter of theological reflection emerges from a foundational revelatory experience. Furthermore, those who understand faith as primarily experiential or critical would also

affirm the transforming influence of faith that leads to an active engagement with the concerns of society. Therefore, paradigms in dialogue are a response to what may appear on the surface to be mutually exclusive and competing approaches.

(2) *Progressive Development – Dialogue*

This relationship is consonant with faith development theories and with cognitive theories, the process of how one comes to knowledge of reality. To speak of conversion is already to assume a set of presuppositions that have their cause in a foundational experience. The nature of this experience is determined by the individual's life context; the quality of the experience is determined by the nature of this experience; and the influence on the person is determined by the above conditions in conjunction with the internal structure of human consciousness and the individual's unique predispositions. That some experience has led a person to a fundamental review of prior concepts and values, leading to a reorientation of life, is antecedent to the conversion process. The experience may be implicit or explicit, open to varying degrees of interpretation and explanation, or meaning giving by itself or in need of reflection to grasp a significance that hides just below the surface. These and a number of determined and undetermined factors all play a role in the nature and quality of the conversion process. The above considerations apply to any type of conversion, be it from an old way of thinking and behaving to a new way, through the various commitments to ideals and values, to the conversion from an *aspiritual* to a spiritual commitment. The concern here is with the latter as experienced and expressed within a religious system, in particular, Christianity. The process of conversion takes place within a matrix of experiences that either occur as an intense peak experience, or in the more mundane and gradual manifestation of the divine breaking into human consciousness through the ordinary experiences of life. In either event, there is the radical shift of one's mental and emotional horizons. Avery Dulles distinguishes between types of conversion in terms of the objectives envisaged. These, for the purposes of this discussion on the movement from experience to critical reflection on that experience, and the transcendental as a coincidental outcome, form stages in the larger movement of the

conversion process. These types of conversion are theistic (to God as transcendent reality), Christian (to Jesus Christ as the supreme self-communication of God), ecclesial (to the Church as the community of faith), and personal (to a way of life which reflects the commitments made to the above).⁹

Bernard Lonergan describes religious conversion as a dynamic state of otherworldly falling in love in response to the love of God made present in the human heart through the grace of the Holy Spirit. For Lonergan the term conversion signifies no mere change or development, but a radical transformation, involving a transvaluation of all values. This dynamic state of radical transformation produces new degrees of cognitional, moral, and affective self-transcendence.¹⁰ This dynamic state is a renewal on these levels, and occurs as moments within the conversion process.

In his transcendental method, Lonergan describes the levels of the cognitional process of coming to insights that radically alter one's orientation, perceptions, and commitments. A concise presentation of the conscious intentional operations of the knowing subject in this method, and coinciding with the stages of conversion as presented by the three paradigms of faith are: *experiencing, understanding, judging, and deciding*.¹¹ Conversion, as the movement from one state of being to another, must necessarily embrace all these stages, whether they occur as distinct steps that are consciously intended, or as movements within the total conversion process. If conversion is the radical orientation of being and action, then in Lonergan's cognitional structure, the transcendental method, understood as examining the very conditions for the possibility of knowing, involves the whole subject. The value of Lonergan's cognitional structure for understanding conversion lies in its consonance with the moments of faith expressed by the three paradigms. Furthermore, it provides an epistemological foundation for asserting the conversion to Christian faith as coinciding with cognitional theory and so an integral part of the process of a deepening of insight.

As this identification of the three paradigms reflecting Lonergan's cognitional process leaves some confusion as to where *judgement* lies, it is necessary to clarify the precise location of judgement in this scheme. Does it fall into the critical phase as a dimension or element within the interpretive and understanding

process, or does it find itself in the transcendental phase, where this is understood as a methodology of understanding the cognition process? A response to these questions brings us back to wisdom as a structuring principle for this reflection. R.J. Snell, who argues that connaturality (a sharing in the divine essence through participation) is the ground of wisdom, provides an answer:

Lonergan's cognitional structure works from experience to understanding, from understanding to judgment, and from judgment to decision, and it is at judgment that Aquinas places wisdom. Connaturality allows a leap over levels of this structure; a person might bypass understanding with its questions and insights and move directly to judgment. This is fine enough, but we must recall that connaturality is a matter of affection and ought not to be forced into the intellect. Connaturality, then, is not a matter of 3rd level judgments but 4th level actions and modes of being, particularly if connaturality is not merely cognitive. Consequently, wisdom in the second sense (connaturality with the Divine) is not knowledge, but is beyond knowledge, and is in the 4th level of action.¹²

Snell's perspective, where his concern is to find a place for wisdom (considered as judgement) with reference to affectivity as necessary for a better understanding and explication of connaturality within Aquinas's thought system, enables a clearer understanding of why judgement must fall into the transcendental paradigm. Not only does it provide for this discussion a deeper understanding of the purpose of the *PSB* as transcendental in its intention, it also enables an understanding of Lonergan's method as reflective of the conversion process. If judgement is considered with reference to action and as a constituent of the transcendental paradigm, it is clear that it is conflated into this paradigm, and so Lonergan's cognitional process is in accord with the three paradigms understood as stages within the conversion process. This will find further affirmation in the following model of relationship between the paradigms considered as integration through the dialectical method.

(3) *Ongoing Dialectic – Integration*

As indicated earlier, a focus on the structural and formal elements of the *PSB* reveals a commitment to the ontological priority of experience in the faith journey. The preconceptual experience of God is the foundation of the faith journey and from whence it

progresses toward more conceptual levels. The conceptual nature of faith is always a secondary phenomenon, a reflection on the experience of God in order to discern the meaning and significance of the faith experience. This personally appropriated meaning is expressed and realized in its active living out in the life of the person of faith. This in turn leads to an intensification of the more complete experience of God in different and changing contexts. This ongoing dialectic of experience, reflection, and practice is a process that continually refines itself, with each stage leading toward a greater conceptualization of faith in the heart, mind, and will of the person of faith.

The core notion of a dialectic process of a continual refinement of previously held positions or understandings derives from its Hegelian designation as a process that brings forth an opposition between a thesis and an antithesis, having within it an urge to be resolved by a synthesis – a combination in which the conflicting elements are retained and reconciled. The triadic dialectical structure in essence is applied here without the strict connotations of opposition but rather as a movement of refinement through articulation, clarification, and application of the earlier positions.

We have established that experience remains the most consistently compelling mode of knowing. However, when statements of truth concerning transcendent realities are based on experience, then the valid objection of the subjective interpretive character of understanding the precise nature of the phenomena experienced is a necessary function of epistemic principles. The interpretation of experience in order to assert certain knowledge needs to be subjected to rigorous critical investigation. Experience is always subjective at the level of a personal encounter with phenomena, be it empirical, mental, or transcendent. This subjectivity does not necessarily render invalid any claims to verifiable truth because of the subjective nature of experience and the subjective criteria governing the interpretive process. If this were indeed the case, then no certainty of knowledge could be claimed based on experience, leading to either solipsism or scepticism.

The broad consensus of meaning about the nature of an experience is a guarantor of the objectively verifiable nature of the phenomena under discussion. While subjectivity may incline one to a particular interpretation of an objectively verifiable phenome-

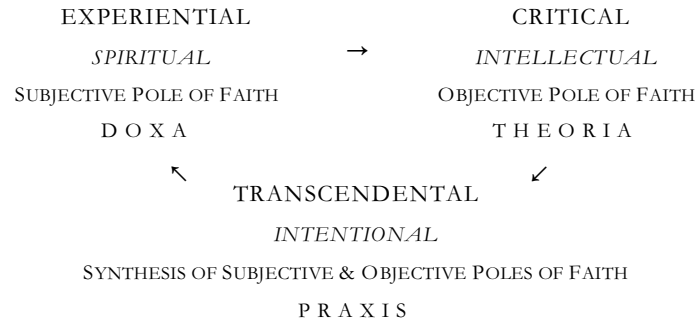
non, this does not exclude the possibility of other subjects sharing a broad agreement about the fundamental fact and nature of the phenomenon experienced. Where disagreement emerges is in the interpretation and meaning given to the phenomenon, and yet this may be a disagreement of opinion rather than of fact. The degree of reasonable objectivity claimed by a critical theological method ensures the reliability of the interpretive understanding derived from this reflective process. The critical function operates as both a model for interpreting the nature of the faith experience, and introduces ordering principles that organize an interpretive understanding into a coherent framework of faith propositions that are refined into doctrine. Thus, the structure and content of theological propositions ensure a systematic ordered foundation for a coherent and demonstrable presentation of the faith experience. The need for a continuous referral back to experience ensures the relevance and meaning of the critical method in theology. This constant inter-referencing between the subjective and objective poles of faith performs a mutually self-correcting function. Where the authentic elements in religious experience find their expression in theology distorted or reduced to theoretical abstractions, the verifiable nature of the faith experience will challenge theology to be faithful to its objective methodology. Reciprocally, the subjective interpretation of the faith experience will be subjected to the critical analysis of systematic theological investigation, which attempts to filter the subjective and psychological interpretations of the faith experience.

However, the circle of understanding is completed when a systematic position based on experience finds its complete meaning in its application in praxis. Theological systems predicated on experiences are themselves verified through their practical implementation in the world of action. The dialectic is further refined when the active implementation of the process itself creates new experiences. These experiences are of a different order from those that led to reflective scrutiny in the first instance and are in need of further critical analysis by systematic theology. Thus, the dialectic continually refines itself at each stage of its actualization in the full circle of experience that demands critical reflection and the secondary conceptualized system finding meaning and verification in its active expression.

(4) *Intersecting Synthesis – Unity in Plurality*

The fourth model of relating the three paradigms is a deepening of the dialectical method, without any significant departure. It is a unified moment in which faith is deepened in the individual and the community through the dialectic described in the third model without the semi-mechanical method of reflection, conceptualization, and ensuing judgement and commitment. These are all gathered into one intersecting synthesis that finds its movement not so much in a dialectical circle, but in an ever-tightening spiral where faith is no longer a conscious decision, a dimension of life, but an integral constituent of being. The person of faith is caught up, immersed in and possessed by faith and all it implies in such a way that the reality of faith is the determining identity of that person. Faith is now an instinctive reality that orients being and action in a moment that defies precise intellectual conception and articulation. Faith is now a dynamic inner experience that is continually lived as an internal and external commitment. It is at this level of faith that the subjective element of faith is reconciled with the objective element of critical reflection through transcendence in both the intellectual sense and in the sense of passing into action. The tension between subject and object is dissolved through conscious intentionality where the experiencing and knowing subject of faith finds in action the affirmation of ultimate reality as the ground of personal being.

The tight interconnection between the three paradigms in this model of relationship affirms Lonergan's claim that true objectivity is authentic subjectivity as, paradoxically, objectivity is sought and found in the knowing subject rather than in the object; objectivity does not inhere in objects, but is rather an achievement of the knower.¹³ It is in this model of relationship between the three paradigms where the meaning and value of each is caught up and actualized in the others. There is very little, if any, distinct separation of the three paradigms in the life of the faithful person, yet neither is the reality of each diluted into an eclectic miscellany. The vigour and intensity of faith as the experience of God in every thought and action is realized through a connatural affinity that sees neither division nor diffusion, but the truth that all is indeed one in the unity of God's love.



Jesus as Exemplar of the Fourth Model

In the first chapter of Mark's Gospel (1:21-39), we find the movement of Jesus depicting the cyclical nature of the process we have described. Jesus's movements in this pericope are both physical and metaphorical, each finding in the other a deeper meaning, with the exterior movement reflecting the interior deepening process. Jesus has just begun his active ministry, one that find its impetus in baptism by John as the foundational event of his ministry. The Baptism of Jesus establishes both his identity and ministry where the voice from heaven proclaims, 'You are my Son, the beloved; my favour rests on you' (Mk 1:11). At once, the Spirit descends on him and drives him into the desert to reflect on his identity, to clarify in his own mind his ministry, and to empower him to fulfil this mission (1:12-13). Having experienced a direct encounter with his Father through the Spirit, Jesus is driven to reflect on it in the solitude of the wilderness aided by the guiding wisdom of the Spirit.

He is now ready for action and begins his ministry, not as a personal enterprise, but with the support of a community of disciples (vv. 16-20). He begins his ministry in the formal setting of the synagogue, the place of instruction, reflection, and worship (vv. 21-22). In the very environment of the context of prayer and reflection, the synagogue, he reaches out in an act of transformative healing. The witnesses in the synagogue are impressed by both his wisdom in teaching and the authority of acting with confident power to bring about that which he teaches (vv. 23-28).

‘At once’ (indicating the simultaneity of his movement in prayer, reflection and action), he leaves the place of public worship to be in community with his new-found friends and is confronted by a situation demanding another act of transformative healing: Simon’s ill mother-in-law. She is healed of a physical ailment, but also transformed inwardly in such a manner that she too reaches out in an act of loving service to the community of the disciples by feeding them (vv. 29-31). Jesus continues to reach out in action, transforming the lives of the afflicted (vv. 32-34), in acts of healing that we must presume transcend the merely physical to reach into the hearts and minds of those he heals.

Early in the morning, well before dawn, he gets up, leaves the house, and goes to a lonely place where he prays. His prayer may well consist of experiencing the re-energizing power of his father, the worship of his father, and a meditative reflection on the experiences he has been through in the previous twenty-four hours. His prayer is disturbed by his companions, who urge him to continue in his ministry of teaching and healing. He moves on and away from this place to new areas of ministry, instructing and performing acts of healing transformation (vv. 35-39). In this passage we find the movement from transcendental experience to reflection to action repeated in a manner where each naturally leads on to the next, where each is expressed and refined by the others, and repeated in an ongoing cycle that reflects the complete process of an authentic faith journey.

CONCLUSION

This discussion has tried to demonstrate that the *Prayer of St Benedict* has significance beyond its historical and devotional value by explaining how it is an expression of a desire for a deeper knowing of God through a process both consonant with the structure of human cognition and subject to the mystery of the self-communication of God. The *PSB* presents an understanding of faith as primarily a gift of God that corresponds with the cognitive faculties of human consciousness. Wisdom, understood as right judgement, is native to the human intellect but deficient in fulfilling its final end as perception of ultimate reality without the necessary element of connaturality. Connaturality as an affinity with the ‘mind’ and ‘will’ of God is itself a gracing of the human

capacity for an intuitive perception of the transcendent. The perception granted by wisdom enables the subject of faith to be 'grasped' by God in a manner where God is recognized as the ground of being and the cause of a furthered understanding of his presence and action in the person.

Wisdom is affirmed as the necessary guiding element that safeguards the fundamentally supernatural character of theology's subject matter. The necessity for the integrating power of wisdom in the faith discussion is even more pressing where diverse perspectives and pluralistic thinking are also essential to genuine theological reflection. There is, however, a twofold temptation to theology if we lose sight of the necessity for wisdom as a guiding and structuring principle for a theology that engages with the experiences and concerns of contemporary life, while at the same time is faithful to its origin in the experiences of God's self-communication through revelation and paradigmatic elements in Christian tradition. On the one hand, there are theologies tempted by the challenges of postmodern thought either to defensively argue themselves into complicated and abstruse positions, or to seek the comforting assurances of a pre-critical dogmatism. On the other hand, some theologies engage with postmodern thought without subjecting it to the above criteria, and inevitably lapse into compromises through a relativism that degenerates into a secular study of theological themes. Needless to say, these are broad characterizations, yet qualifiedly descriptive of the present condition of elements within contemporary theology. The challenge of the *PSB* to theology is a renewed appreciation of wisdom as a source for understanding and insight into both the divine mysteries and their integral relationship with human experience in our contemporary world.

Wisdom is also affirmed as the source of the capacity to perceive God in a manner that enables a rational intuition of the internal structure of faith. The *PSB* is understood as providing the meta-paradigm for a construction of paradigms that reflect and explicate the experiential, critical, and transcendental elements of faith. These paradigms are discerned in the structure, content, and intention of the *PSB*. Defining characteristics of each approach affirm the validity of their designation as paradigms, confirm their

epistemic relevance, and clarify elements within each as specific to that approach, by way of contrast.

Furthering the wisdom character as essential to genuine faith is its function as the foundation for discerning the complementary nature of the paradigms in their correlation to each other. The four models of relationship discover further elements that provide epistemic foundations through their consonance with the human cognition process. Each model takes up the nature and quality of the preceding model, where these are actualized at a further stage of development, finding completion in the final model. The final model of relationship is not the conclusion of the process, but a model describing the continuing development of faith as it becomes increasingly intensified in a contemplative-active appropriation of faith.

NOTES

¹ The version of the *Prayer* analysed here is the more common and shortened English version. What follows is the original Latin version found in the *Book of Cerne* (see note 2):

Oratio Sancti Benedicti.

Digneris mihi donare, Pater pie et sancte, intellectum, qui te intelligat, sensum qui te sentiat, animum qui te sapiat, diligentiam quae te quaerat, sapientiam quae te inveniatur, animum qui te cognoscat, viscera quae te ament, cor quod te cogitet, actum qui te augeat, auditum qui te audiat, oculos qui te videant, linguam quae te praedicet, conversationem quae tibi placeat, patientiam quae te sustineat, perseverantiam quae te exspectet, finem perfectum, praesentiam tuam sanctam, resurrectionem bonam, retributionem, vitam aeternam. Amen.

² The *Book of Cerne*, believed to be compiled under the patronage of Æthelwold, Bishop of Lichfield from 818-830, is to be found in the Cambridge University Library (MS Ll. 1. 10). The *Prayer of St Benedict* appears on p. 119 of *The Prayer Book of Aedelwald the Bishop, Commonly Called the Book of Cerne* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902), edited by Dom Adrian Benedict Kuypers (1868-1935), monk of Downside Abbey.

³ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1974), p. 131.

⁴ S.J. Grenz and J.R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), pp. 3-4.

⁵ Herman J. Pieterse, 'Meta-Paradigms in Theological Thought' in *Quodlibet Journal*, vol. 3, no. 4, 2001; <http://www.quodlibet.net/articles/pieterse-metaparadigms.shtml>. Accessed on 14/08/2009.

⁶ Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, 'The New Theology and Transcendental Thomism: Karl Rahner', in James Livingston and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza (eds.), *Modern Christian Thought: Vol. 2: The Twentieth Century* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2000), pp. 208-10.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ian G. Barbour, 'Ways of Relating Science and Theology', in R.J. Russell, W.R. Stoeger, G.V. Coyne, eds., *Physics, Philosophy, and Theology: A Common Quest for Understanding* (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory, 1988), p. 21.

⁹ Avery Dulles, 'Conversion' in *The Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, R. Latourelle and R. Fisichella, eds., (New York: Crossroads, 1994), p. 192.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, Frederick E. Crow and Robert M. Doran, eds. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), pp. 296-303. Of course, the whole of *Insight*

is an explication of Lonergan's General Empirical Method with these four elements as central to the process of knowing.

¹² R.J. Snell, 'Connaturality in Aquinas: The Ground of Wisdom' in *Quodlibet Journal*, Vol. 5, no. 4, October 2003; <http://www.quodlibet.net/articles/snell-aquinas.shtml>. Accessed on 12/09/2009.

¹³ Cf. Bernard Lonergan, *Insight*, pp. 401-2. Lonergan deals with the interconnection between subjectivity and objectivity in chapter 13 (pp. 399-409) of *Insight*; however, the core notions that relate to our discussion are the principles laid out in pp. 399-402.